



Media Statement

Dec. 22, 2023

California Welcoming Taskforce Statement Re: Open-Air Detention Sites and Family Separations

It has been over three months, two deaths and multiple medical emergencies without any changes at Custom and Border Protection's (CBP) multiple "open-air detention sites."

We, the organizations of the California Welcoming Task Force, demand an immediate end to open-air detention sites, family separations and needless deaths!

Thousands of asylum seekers have been held by CBP at these open-air detention sites (OADS) in the Jacumba desert and San Ysidro in San Diego County without food, water, protection from the elements, adequate sanitation facilities, or medical care. **This is a [direct violation](#) of the CBP's own standards of treatment for people in their custody.**

This atrocious treatment continues despite the deaths of two people, a 13-year-old boy and a 29-year-old woman, and numerous medical emergencies requiring urgent attention. **With temperatures beginning to plummet near freezing, we fear more people will die. CBP must cease operations at these sites immediately.**

Conditions in the OADS

As many as 800 migrants and people seeking asylum are held in these sites at a time as they await processing. People of all ages, including babies and very young children, seniors and individuals with disabilities, are regularly held for days at a time or even a week, as [documented](#) by organizations such as the Women's Refugee Commission and Al Otro Lado. Individuals are forced to sleep on the ground or in makeshift shelters. CBP makes it clear that people seeking asylum who leave the sites before processing will face deportation.

[Two complaints](#) about these [gross violations of human rights](#), and another [complaint about the family separations](#) they have caused, have been filed with the Department of Homeland Security Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, including by members of the California Welcoming Task Force.

Nonprofits, mutual aid organizations and volunteers are doing what they can to help, distributing water, food, diapers, clothing, and blankets, and providing first aid. **Despite being the largest federal law enforcement agency in the United States, CBP is failing to meet its obligations to provide basic humanitarian relief.**

Thus far, **no local, state or federal government funding or support has been provided to support these vulnerable individuals.**

Volunteers, warm clothing and monetary donations are desperately needed. To volunteer or donate goods, contact volunteer@alotrolado.org. To donate funds, use Venmo at [@alotrolado](#) or visit alotrolado.org.

Family Separations

CBP's processing of people seeking asylum from these open-air detention sites, as well as the agency's practice of releasing asylum seekers in high volumes at transit centers and makeshift nonprofit organization installations throughout San Diego County has led to more than 1,133 needless family separations [documented](#) since September 2023. These separations amongst adult family members, are not covered by the recent settlement agreement in *Ms. L v. ICE*, which prevents the separation of parents from their minor children.

This lack of CBP coordination to keep families together is causing needless suffering and goes against the American value of protecting the sanctity of family units.

Nonprofit organizations are stepping in to do the work the government is failing to do by working to reunite these families. Thus far, there have been 279 confirmed cases of family reunification. In some cases, separations lasted for as long as 48 days.

Hundreds of families remain separated, still agonizing over their loved ones' whereabouts and safety.

"Children should not be dying on our doorstep, and if the Department of Homeland Security continues its horrific practice of forcing people—including babies, pregnant women, and the elderly—to remain in dangerous locations as temperatures drop, more people will die. This is entirely preventable if Customs and Border Protection followed its own guidelines and ensured water, medical attention, basic sanitation, and protection from the elements rather than corralling people in inhumane conditions and standing by as they succumb to the elements," said **Guerline Jozef, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Haitian Bridge Alliance**.

"Customs and Border Protection is clearly violating its own national standards by forcing migrants to wait in open-air detention sites since 2022 in the San Diego area. Together with community members and other organizations, our AFSC staff has provided food, water, and assisted men, women, and children with injuries, including from wall falls, as they wait in dangerous wilderness conditions and exposed to the elements. Decades of concentrating resources for enforcement-only purposes has made the US government ill-prepared, and unwilling, to receive asylum seekers with the respect and dignity they deserve. Instead, migrants endure degrading treatment from an agency that misdirects its billion dollar budget away from attending to the humanitarian needs of those seeking safety from harm," said **Pedro Rios, director of the American Friends Service Committee's US-Mexico Border Program**.

"CBP must uphold humanitarian standards as it processes vulnerable individuals seeking protection. The deaths of a 13-year-old boy and a 29-year-old woman are tragedies that could have been prevented. While nonprofit organizations have gone above and beyond their capacity to address humanitarian gaps, it is CBP's responsibility to meet its own standards of treatment for people in their custody. The risk is imminent as winter settles in and more individuals are forced to flee a growing number of crises worldwide. We cannot let the death toll rise," said **María Silva, Technical Advisor, Crossborder and Asylum, with the International Rescue Committee (IRC)**.

"It is heart-wrenching for our staff and volunteers documenting these separations every day to have to explain to asylum seekers that we do not know when their loved one will be released – they could come in a bus in the next hours, days, or weeks. These families embark on unimaginable journeys to the U.S. southern border to seek relief only to be met with the psychological torment of being separated from their spouse, parent, young adult child, or other family member they traveled with. DHS must do everything in its power to root out these unnecessary separations that pile on stress and uncertainty for migrant families and place additional burdens on nonprofit organizations responding to facilitate family reunification," said **Meghan Zavala, Data & Policy Analyst with Al Otro Lado**.

“Every single day, for months, our team has seen firsthand the suffering caused by the horrific conditions at open air detention sites. We’ve seen people dropped off in San Diego with broken limbs, people who are sick, people who are hungry. ImmDef has also helped document hundreds of family separations. We've consoled a terrified 18-year-old who recounted the horror of having the rest of his family taken from him at an open air detention site despite begging to stay together. We’ve comforted a grandmother who was separated from her adult children and grandchildren and left on her own with no way of contacting them. We’ve tried to assure a young woman that we would help her find her husband as she cried uncontrollably in our arms. This dereliction of duty by CBP has real consequences, resulting in human suffering and the loss of life. It needs to stop now,” said **Lindsay Toczyłowski, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Immigrant Defenders Law Center (ImmDef)**.

“CBP should provide care to the most vulnerable migrants it processes for asylum and is required to do so by law. Refugee Health Alliance has seen first hand the consequences of minors and other patients with complicated medical issues placed in camps along the border wall in freezing conditions while awaiting processing. Local community members and NGOs have provided all of the medical care, shelters, food and warm clothing for migrants who must wait in outdoor camps for processing. We urge CBP to provide these services as required by law and urgently process asylum seekers,” said **Matthew Waxman, MD., Refugee Health Alliance Board Member**.

“The continued detention of communities in egregious open air detention sites has cost the lives of individuals who are seeking safety and protection,” said **Isa Peña, Director of Strategy with Innovation Law Lab**. “CBP must meet its obligations to provide basic humanitarian aid and end its practices of family separation.”

The California Welcoming Task Force is a binational coalition dedicated to re-envisioning how the U.S. can welcome people seeking asylum safely and expeditiously at our border by coordinating across sectors (humanitarian and health, legal, advocacy and communications). More info. at www.rapidresponsesd.org/cawtf.

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(Below NOT for publication)

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